

### *Ethnic Notions. Tongues Untied* Mainstreams and margins

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Marlon Riggs' two major videos, *ETHNIC NOTIONS* and *TONGUES UNTIED*, stand at two very different points of contemporary documentary activity. *ETHNIC NOTIONS* is an Emmy-winning tape using a classic PBS expository format. In sharp contrast, *TONGUES UNTIED* weaves poetry, performance, confession, and history in a complex pattern for a personal editorial statement. The one is thoroughly conventional, the other thoroughly innovative. Both of them also represent major statements by a black intellectual who works primarily in the medium of video, rather than the traditional media of spoken and written words. At a time when print culture seems in slow but definite decline, Riggs stands among the most talented African American intellectuals choosing new forms of expression to raise critical questions for black politics and for a broader U.S. political culture.

*TONGUES UNTIED* (1989, 55 min.) describes the situation, politics and culture of black gay men using an intense mixture of styles ranging from social documentary to experimental montage, from personal narrative to lyric poetry. Through daring juxtapositions it functions as a critique of white racism as well as African-American and white homophobia while sounding a call for black gay men to unite. One of the most powerful and effective political videotapes made in recent years, *TONGUES UNTIED* is formally complex, politically passionate, and unhesitatingly self-revealing. It treats issues revealing the interconnection of race and gender politics with sophistication and in so doing persuades its viewers that these matters are significant and urgent.

Given my own situation as a straight white man, I can consider the tape's obvious importance to black gay men only in terms of the critical discussion the tape has generated. That dialogue makes it clear that *TONGUES UNTIED* is not merely a report on gay males in the African-American community, but a major intellectual intervention which is helping create the terms in which black gay men are collectively thinking and imagining their identity. While originally intended for a primary audience of black gay men, in release the tape has been shown successfully to diverse audiences. It thus becomes an important point of political discourse

within the black community in general, in the gay community, and in the straight white culture. How the tape achieves that position can be best understood with a close analysis.

It is tempting to write about Riggs' work by projecting a simple development from the conventional ETHNIC NOTIONS to the experimental TONGUES UNTIED. However I'm wary of so doing. Each represents a different strategy for different primary audiences and different issues. And subsequently Riggs produced two additional short experimental pieces — ANTHEM and AFFIRMATIONS — while also working on a sequel to ETHNIC NOTIONS, tentatively titled COLOR ADJUSTMENT: BLACKS IN PRIME TIME, which covers more recent depictions. Clearly he is accomplished as a media maker in both mainstream and marginal discourses.

### *ETHNIC NOTIONS: THE LOGIC OF MAINSTREAMING*

"There is nothing wrong with tap dancing. There is nothing wrong with using your voice, your body, as a musical instrument. It is the laughter, and the music, and the dancing at the *exclusion* of dramatic images, of realistic images, that is at fault. And it's this exclusion which we hope to dissolve." — choreographer Leni Sloan, concluding ETHNIC NOTIONS.

Marlon Riggs' earlier tape, ETHNIC NOTIONS (1986) is an hour-long educational documentary on the history of popular culture's demeaning stereotypes and caricatures of African Americans from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. It uses what might be called an almost pure public broadcasting format, reflecting in part its initial production in conjunction with KQED, the San Francisco PBS station. Since its first broadcast the tape has circulated very successfully in the education market. Many teachers have found it exceptionally useful in demonstrating and explaining mass culture racism to white students.

A good part of this effectiveness stems from ETHNIC NOTION'S use of "mainstream" presentational style. Among independent media producers, "mainstreaming" means accepting the dominant forms and values of conventional media. For those coming from oppressed and marginalized groups — racial and ethnic minorities, women gays and lesbians, the working class and poor, political radicals, youth — mainstreaming means speaking not from one's original position, but constructing a discourse within the already established system of power in order to speak effectively within a larger circle. Fundamentally it serves the goal of assimilation for both maker and group. For the outsider group, mainstreaming implies showing how one is like the dominant culture by mimicking its forms and calling on a politics of liberal pluralism. For the media maker, mainstreaming promises acceptance, larger and diverse audiences, a chance to break into the dominant system, better chances in the grant game, bigger budgets, more prestige, etc.

ETHNIC NOTIONS uses an illustrated presentation of an analysis by authority figures. For the most part a balance of white and black, male and female talking heads identified by name and university and shot in a black limbo present the

evolution of various stereotypes: the sambo, the mammy, the coon, the pickaninny, the Uncle Tom. An unseen, female, voice over narrator bridges the interviewed experts, and additional voices sing songs and read from various written texts such as storybooks. Key points are introduced with striking examples, elaborated by the academics and illustrated with still and moving images. The essayistic movement from point to point is clear, the authorities don't contradict each other and can sometimes be cut together in smoothly flowing exposition, bridged by cutaways to film clips, still and animated cartoon images, or documentary photos. The main point is undeniable: the U.S. has a long history of using demeaning caricatures of African Americans in its popular culture and these stereotypes embody and perpetuate racism.

High production values and clear presentation make *ETHNIC NOTIONS* easy to follow. As a result, the tape has been extensively used in black studies, popular culture, and communications courses in high schools and colleges. Teachers find its examples memorable and thought provoking for students. Many white students today are not familiar with the material and find the historical review informative. Many black students can recall seeing similar examples or derivative stereotyping in their own experience. Discussion following the screening is usually lively and raises many pertinent points.

Toward the tape's end several sequences are introduced with bold intertitles that recapitulate the preceding exposition of racial slurs: black is ugly; blacks are savage; blacks are happy servants. This emphasis is just the sort of thing that in a classroom situation would start the students note taking. But in addition to its excellent organization, there are some other reasons why teachers find the tape so useful. First of all, it flatters liberal and moderate sensibilities by having both white and black experts delivering a lecture on racial stereotypes with many examples that very few white students would fail to find appalling, or, minimally, socially unpleasant to tolerate — at least in classroom discussion. Ash trays shaped like human heads that hold cigarettes in grotesquely exaggerated lips, supposedly comic postcards showing alligators threatening pickaninny children, and animated cartoons of happy coons devouring watermelon slices present images which are easily marked as offensive. As with much liberal media work, the tape makes the media the main culprit: if we could just get beyond negative images and kitsch caricatures in popular culture, it seems to say, we could achieve racial harmony and equality.

Unmistakable irony marks certain passages, as when a song about happy slaves on the plantation is illustrated with a photo of extensive scars from whippings on a slave's back. In this way it has a strategy that is rather typical of PBS historical documentary: something unpleasant from the past is shown, the present day audience can be appropriately distressed at how bad it was, and then at the end we can all feel good that it isn't like that any more.

Because it centers so much attention on kitsch objects and entertainments such as minstrel shows and vaudeville, the tape also invites a rather easy scorn from middle class and middle class aspirant students. So obvious, so overcoded, virtually

vomiting stereotypes, kitsch as the low end of popular culture consumed by aesthetically uneducated people, is always open to dismissal from a higher class position.[1][[open notes in new window](#)] The more subtle racism of middlebrow entertainment considered progressive in its own time, such as *SHOW BOAT* or *PORGY AND BESS*, and artifacts such as "tourist art" African masks sold to decorate "buppie" apartments or highbrow art such as modernist appropriations of "primitive" art goes unspoken. And because the tape displays past kitsch whose racial caricature seems even more noticeable because dated, the objects are easy to dismiss without seeing the connection to contemporary examples.

The tape is undeniably effective, and especially so in classes concerned with racism in the media and commonplace racial stereotyping. Yet by its specific focus, it doesn't deal with many related issues which could be addressed. The nature of caricature and stereotyping in mass culture is not considered in depth. Doesn't mass culture always simplify and stereotype? Isn't Arnold Schwarzenegger's star image a caricature? Or Dolly Parton's? Or Spike Lee's Mars Blackmon? Should we therefore be "against" caricature and stereotyping of all kinds in art? What about high art? Isn't it also racist in its presentations? Would the history of U.S. literature or painting reveal a distinctly different ideology than the popular culture examples do? (The tape does discuss Paul Robeson's film portrayal of the Eugene O'Neill play *Emperor Jones*, and notes its continuation of the savage stereotype.) These questions, and others that could be raised in extension of ideas touched on briefly in the tape, do not invalidate it. In fact, in a teaching situation they would be welcome additions to a discussion and would lead to a more complex analysis by the audience.

Part of the problem here is that by having such a rich array of historically based materials, the tape presents most of this as a problem of the past rather than of the present. Actually the voices bring us up to the present, but visuals to cover recent material (for which it would be difficult and much more expensive to gain copyright permission) are rather spare: two tracking shots across various publications and posters at the end are supposed to suggest the continuity to today. Many might give an easy assent to Morris Day, Mr. T, Eddie Murphy, or Redd Foxx (as Sanford).[2] But would we so readily agree that Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Prince, Run DMC, and Grace Jones (to mention some of the figures shown) continue these stereotypes without significant change? And among works not shown how would we evaluate satire such as Spike Lee's chock-full-of-stereotypes *SCHOOL DAZE*? Or the TV show *IN LIVING COLOR*? Does comic caricature differ somehow or significantly from simply demeaning propagandistic caricature? If so, how, and how can and do oppressed groups use humor within the context of such caricature?[3]

Riggs addresses some of these issues briefly in *TONGUES UNTIED*, referencing homophobia in Eddie Murphy's comedy and Spike Lee's *SCHOOL DAZE*. In a more recent article, he argues that current media representations of black gay men by black film/video makers, performers, and Rap musicians present repackaged versions of the Coon (now the Snap Queens seen on *IN LIVING COLOR*) or the Brute (as in the AIDS-infected homosexual Convict-Rapist in Reginald and

Warrington Hudlin's HOUSE PARTY).[4] The result, he concludes, is to validate an "Afrocentric" Black Macho myth by crating a "Negro Faggot" Other within the black community's consciousness. In the process actual black gay men are denied their existence, their masculinity, and their blackness.

A further related problem of the PBS style is that ETHNIC NOTIONS offers a restricted discussion of how past change took place. It marks large changes such as the ante bellum period's portrayal of happy plantation slaves changing to the Reconstruction image of savages, and it explains changing power relations as a cause. While it shows clips from BIRTH OF A NATION, it doesn't mention that the NAACP spent an immense amount of its early organization efforts in criticizing and organizing against the film. In fact, the NAACP was criticized at times by other African American and anti-racist organizations and individuals for putting so much energy into media pressure group work to the neglect of other forms of political organizing. The question of priorities must always be addressed in media organizing. To use an image from ETHNIC NOTIONS' parade of stereotypes: How important, given scarce resources, is it to try to change Aunt Jemima's picture on the pancake mix? What change occurs if she turns out slimmer and lighter skinned?

The tape explains that the Civil Rights movement drastically changed the public and popular image of black Americans and that this ended the period of extreme caricature. The tape doesn't mention that this was also the period when the black professional athlete became a major part of U.S. sports entertainment. Surely having many mass culture images of physically strong and skilled African American men also shaped public consciousness. ETHNIC NOTIONS doesn't indicate effective strategies and tactics for today in addressing mass culture racism. Two experts indicate that there is little change in the 70s and 80s: mammy figures appear in TV shows, black comedians continue the minstrel and buffoon tradition, and black men in action films are shown as more violent than white men. But this is stated, not illustrated. And the question of how black audience members understand and use mass media images is not explored.[5]

In using the PBS style, there is a limit to how many major ideas you can effectively present. It is fundamentally a linear style which uses orthodox exposition to make its points: dramatic opening examples, summary of the main points to be introduced, sequential progression through each section with a recapitulation of topic points at the start of each section and a summary conclusion at the end of each section, and a final summation. The primary structuring line comes from the verbal soundtrack: it is an illustrated script. This style and organization is very familiar to the audience. Its foundation is the expository essay taught in high school and college; it remains the dominant way educational and social-political documentaries are organized. It also produces a viewing experience which students find easy to take notes on, since their notes reproduce the general outline of the argument. And it is fairly easy to remember, thus gratifying the teacher who judges the pedagogical merits of the piece by student's ability to remember and repeat the tape's major ideas. But there is a limit to the number of major ideas a mediamaker can present this way: perhaps one every ten minutes or so, or about the same that a

good college lecturer would offer.

There is another level of analysis in ETHNIC NOTIONS, one that is more complex and subtle, though it remains subordinate and fully emerges only in a few places. This argument is about cultural contradiction. It is stated most succinctly early on in the tape when racist caricatures are explained as stemming from the paradox of a nation founded on granting freedom to all while maintaining slavery as an institution. The tape argues that popular culture images, through accumulation, shape "gut level feelings" or beliefs, or "the perception of reality," or "part of our psyche." [6] Doubtless this is the most important first thing to say about such images. But it begs the questions of power and pleasure which shape the production, circulation, and reception of such images. On two occasions critic Barbara Christian mentions that African Americans come to believe in stereotypes of themselves, which become part of their psyche. But the point is not pursued or illustrated. And because all the authorities speak in the third person about the reception and effects of racist caricature, it seems that "other people" absorb cultural racism while the authorities (and we viewers as attentive members of the audience) are inoculated against its influence.

The talking heads and illustrative cutaways style is significantly changed in a key section. One of the two nonacademic experts, choreographer Leni Sloan, makes several key points. First in interview, he discusses the origins of blackface minstrels first in the development of a unique African American dance style of shuffling and jumping which was an evasive accommodation to religious law which prohibited dancing which involved crossing the feet. In the 1820s a white entertainer who played as a black, T.D. Rice, mimicked a crippled black man dancing: a portrayal that became Jim Crow in minstrelsy. Sloan points out the complications of this historical evolution and its further elaboration when black performers were allowed on the minstrel stage but in blackface and with adopted Irish names. He then portrays in one-man show style, Bert Williams, the greatest African American blackface comedian who achieved star status and financial success on Broadway but who, the character tells us, couldn't get a drink in a neighborhood bar.

The effect of Sloan's presentation of Williams is remarkable within the tape because it brings the issues down to a first person narrative told directly to the camera, which accelerates an empathetic response. Sloan appears again, in the last shot in the film to say that when blacks are presented as only singing, dancing, and clowning to the exclusion of other aspects of their lives that popular culture imagery becomes racist. Sloan is the strongest of the authorities because he seems to speak with a fuller sense of contradiction, to speak from experience, from being "inside" the problem of artistic representation, while the other authorities speak from a distance.

At another point, near the end of the tape, a complex formal arrangement makes a powerful statement. Ethel Waters is seen and heard singing "Darkies Never Dream," a song that continues the pattern of docile mammies who only exist to serve whites. Intercut with her presentation is the sound and image of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The contrast of audio/visual elements



makes a political statement and also presents the fundamental contradiction between white-dominated popular culture images and black-articulated political aspirations using distinctly video graphic means.

To sum up, *ETHNIC NOTIONS* is a remarkably effective educational tape in addressing its most specific area of concern, and its formal construction and use of the PBS style is part of that effectiveness. At the same time, definite limits to the analysis appear within the piece. In his next major video, *TONGUES UNTIED*, Riggs found an expanded form for addressing complex contradictions.

### *TONGUES UNTIED: THE PASSION AT THE MARGINS*

*TONGUES UNTIED* is perhaps best defined as an experimental essay or an editorial opinion tape. It explains the various situations of black gay men, and addresses that audience directly, sounding a call to action, to no longer be silent, to band together, to speak out, and to organize in their self-interest. For viewers who are not African American homosexual men, the tape permits an experience of directly hearing and seeing their concerns. And its power for this secondary set of viewers distinctly derives from the use of first person expression. Rather than assuming the dispassionate stance of a mainstreaming format, *TONGUES UNTIED* makes its case directly by speaking of the pain and the pride of being black and gay. The tape's goal is to celebrate "Black men loving black men." To do this, it uses a variety of forms which are native to black culture and especially to black gay culture. For its primary audience the tape provides the pleasure of recognition, but for its secondary audience it provides a series of lessons about cultural context and political expression.

*TONGUES UNTIED* begins with an incantation as several voices repeatedly chant, "Brother to brother." Fading up from a black screen, we see slow motion images of groups of black men in public spaces such as basketball courts. The slow motion makes their casual glances at each other and gestures of touching and high fiving more significant than usual. But these images juxtaposed against the voice track make it clear that the male bonding depicted also covers black men's immense experience of anger and hurt in U.S. culture. A voice over narrator tells us, in meeting other black gay men:

"I am more likely to muse about my latest piece or so-and-so's party at Club Chi-chi than about the anger and hurt I felt that morning when a jeweler refused me entrance to his store because I am black and male and we are all perceived as thieves. I will swallow that hurt and should I speak of it will vocalize only the anger and say 'I should have bust out his windows'..."

The images here change from extreme close ups of men's faces to TV news footage of the summer'89 Virginia Beach incidents where black fraternity men in the resort community were beaten by aggressive cops and broke store windows in turn. The voices multiply, and intertitles make more connections about black men's shared rage: Howard Beach; Virginia Beach; Yusef Murder, CRACK; AIDS; BLACK MEN; Endangered Species?

Silence is a way to grin and bear the burden. By starting with the experience and pain of silence, Riggs speaks to a pervasive experience of African American people in the U.S.: men, women, children, straight and gay. Knowing that some form of punishment, retaliation, and humiliation is the likely response for speaking out against oppression and injustice, blacks learn early on to be silent for self-protection. As Paul Laurence Dunbar put it in a classic poem,

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.  
— from "We Wear the Mask," 1896

The pairing of silence/invisibility and the relation of that pair to the couplet hurt/anger forms one of the most fundamental tropes of black culture and African American life experience. Because TONGUES UNTIED starts like this, referring to a virtually universal experience among African Americans, it provides initial access to the entire argument of the tape.

The titles come up and we then see Marlon Riggs naked in black void (though we don't know it's Riggs at this point) while the audio track continues to refer to silence. The tape begins to make an argument against silence, calling it a shield, a cloak, a sword—one that cuts both ways. The narrator calls for speaking out for one's self, finally revealing, "now that I have faced death," asking for an initiation while we see men kiss.

The mood drastically shifts from the dark limbo space to a brightly lit room. The camera pans across the body of a man calling a phone sex line. In a comic fantasy, suddenly the phone line is transformed. The caller seeks a "BGA," (black gay activist) for very safe sex and activist tasks such as licking envelopes. From this comic transition, the tone changes to stories of resistance, starting with the snap. Snapping, or finger popping, is a characteristic gesture in the black gay male community. It is often begun with a broad, flamboyant wave of the arm, ending in the snap, but there are endless varieties, and at a later point variations are shown. [7]

Illustrations of snaps continue with another storyteller in a black limbo who relates how on a Washington, D.C. bus ride, two brothers at the back of the bus began loudly quarrelling about which of the pair was "the bitch." As the bus goes along, filling with more commuters, the argument becomes more and more pronounced until finally one of them declares, "I'm a 45 year old black gay man who enjoys, enjoys, taking dick in his rectum! I'm not your bitch. (snap!) Your bitch is at home with your kids." (Snap! Snap!)[8]

The next story tells of a group of black men going to a new club and being insulted by the doorman who obviously didn't want to admit them. This story ends with resistance,



"Three pieces of ID? (Snap! Snap! Snap!) She didn't know what hit her! We took our money and left. The next day I reported that dive to the mayor's office, the human rights commission, the NAACP, and the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club. Don't mess with a snap diva! (punctuated with snaps)"

The tape then goes on comically to illustrate various snaps (some courtesy of the Institute of Snap!thology), which provide both a comic lightening of the mood and a documentation of a unique gesture in black gay subculture.

The story of being hassled at a bar provides a hook for the black straight audience in that they too have most likely experienced this kind of social discrimination. The tape thus provides key moments of engagement for its secondary audience. This explains some of the tape's power — it provides a multiplicity of ways to relate to, to get into, the subject at hand if one is willing to listen. It also helps explain the fact that TONGUES UNTTED has been successful with many different audiences. However the main vehicle for engaging straights, and whites, is Marlon Riggs' own story.

In his personal narrative, shot with a tight close up of his face, Riggs begins talking about childhood sexuality, and how, although all the little boys played at sex with each other, he was different in that the others traded giving and receiving, while he just gave it away. Later he came to understand that this unthought and spontaneous activity was actually socially condemned as he learned the terms, "punk", "faggot", "freak", and "homo. " Riggs' testimony sets up the major theme of social/political constriction through language.

He then goes on to talk about how he was one of a few black students chosen to integrate a school in Georgia. As a result he was called a "Tom" by local blacks, suspicious of his relative achievement. He was also called a "Motherfuckin' Coon" by local whites, and greeted at school with "Nigger Go Home." He became totally alienated in the process. Visually this story uses extreme closeups of lips speaking the words: finally a rapid montage of slurs and insults, directed against Riggs' being black and homosexual, which surrounded his transition from child to adult. He explains that he withdrew into himself in response to these labels he never sought. The effect of this sequence for all audiences is very powerful, for almost everyone in the audience can recall facing anxieties and doubts in adolescence. Many sympathize with the eighth grader facing hostile schoolmates shouting racist comments, but the compounding of the identification by adding homophobic terms calls for a new leap of imaginative acceptance for many. This sequence demonstrates how Riggs uses first person voice. Stylistically and politically it provides a formal possibility for documentary to fulfill an increasingly necessary (on practical, theoretical, and political levels) demand to express gender/sexuality, race and class issues simultaneously and in their fully articulated complexity.

By this point in the tape it has: displayed much of its basic strategy: dealing with a complicated interweaving of black culture and gay culture in terms of verbal language and nonverbal gesture. Black subculture in the U.S. is verbalized by those artists who must "mouth with myriad subtleties," who often follow the lead of the

African American folklore figure of the Signifying Monkey, a adroit trickster who endlessly talks himself into and out of trouble, and whose most obvious current commercial cultural manifestation is found in the range of Rap music. As a marginalized subculture, gay culture shares many structural similarities with black culture. But the differences are also significant. Since gays are not identified by physical characteristics and do not share in a common subculture from birth, the making of gay communities takes place among people who are themselves very diverse in class, ethnicity, region, age, etc. Almost all gays and lesbians can choose to pass for straight, while relatively few blacks have the option of passing for white.

In forming gay culture, then, people must find ways of identifying each other, and one of the most central ways this happens is through the creation and re-creation of distinctive language and gesture (clothing, grooming, taste in arts and recreation, are also frequently important clues). The commonplace is accentuated in a way to multiply its meanings. Thus irony, particularly an ironic self-awareness which plays with the arbitrary and artificial nature of language and gesture as social constructions, becomes an important and heightened form of expression. Camp attitude, in the broadest sense, expresses this complexity. For black gay men, participating in two subcultural frameworks at once, discourse is always contradictory: silence/invisibility is compounded by the possibilities of heightened expression as a form of resistance. And poetry becomes one of the supreme forms of that expression.

The complexity of race and gender issues is further developed in the next two sections. First we see an example of gay bashing ending with the victim prostrate on the ground after being attacked by a group (black on black). This passage substantially ups the ante by moving from verbal insult to displaying the threat of direct physical violence against gays. Here the sound track moves from percussive music to poetry relating an incident, with a visual and audio dissolve to Roberta Flack singing, "The first time ever I saw your face..." while we see a school yearbook photo of a young white man. The image increases in screen size while Riggs narrates, telling how within his school experience this person became his friend, and although they were not lovers, what a blessing it was to feel passion and what a curse that a white boy provided it. This section may well be very unsettling to blacks, for it indicates that at least some of the time the black community itself cannot take care of its own, provide the emotional sustenance to survive oppression, and in fact may be the source of considerable pain — "Tom!"

If the African American community stands partially indicted in the previous section, the white gay community receives its share of criticism in the next section as Riggs details his later move to San Francisco's gay ghetto: "...cruising white boys, I played out adolescent dreams." At that time, he adds, he tried not to notice what few black images were available; we see racist caricatures of mammies, studs, and slaves. He concludes that finally he realized he was an invisible man here and quit the scene.

In finding the space to be openly gay, he loses his black identity. This marks a major break in terms of the rhythm of TONGUES UNTIED and the next section

serves to provide a space for reflection as well as a further complication around issues of identity. A transvestite appears, smoking a cigarette in slow motion, while the soundtrack plays a melancholy blues, Billie Holiday singing "Lover-man, where can you be?" then a second transvestite in street drag — clothing flashy enough to get you noticed, and probably noticed for cross dressing — accompanied by Nina Simone in a slow version of "Black is the color of my true love's hair," and a first person poem about choosing to dress as a woman. Appropriating black women's blues, detailing emotional sensitivity, provides a lull for considering black men in drag as fully a part of the community.

Here and throughout the tape, Riggs provides a kind of time-release capsule in dealing with issues. Something is presented, alluded to, or hinted at, and then is referred to again at a different point in a different context. Depictions are sometimes detached from interpretations and viewers are called on to make imaginative leaps to connect the different points. Or sharp contrasts of style or mood bring different issues into focus or relation to each other.

The problem of homophobia in the black community is presented boldly as a shock cut response to the preceding drag image: "Abomination!" and a close up of a preacher's hand slamming down on a Bible — the Word institutionalized. The black political activist argues that with the homosexual, you can't tell which side he's on: black or gay. Riggs responds: as if you could somehow separate the two. Another says a gay man is no kind of a role model for kids. Again Riggs articulates the effect of such prejudice: to withdraw into silence. Excerpts from Eddie Murphy's notoriously homophobic stage routines follow, along with clips from the step show in Spike Lee's SCHOOL DAZE with the political activists stepping to the beat of repeated insults: "Fag, Fag, Fag." With a sad irony, Riggs notes this is what is produced by the "talented tenth." A subsequent montage equates the bigoted statement, the abusive insult, and the homophobic joke with violent bashing of gays (repeating the earlier visuals), inextricably linking verbal attack with physical assault.

The response, we hear, with a slow drum beat in background, like a heartbeat, is silence and anger. This section marks the most complicated visual/verbal montage of the tape to this point. By use of a voice-over off screen Riggs gives the response, and by use of an image of a silent face (Essex Hemphill, whose poetry is prominent in the tape), gives room to mark the wound, the impact of the remark on an actual human being. This passage in the tape is dense with contradiction. To paraphrase: if not being openly attacked, one is tolerated only if silent; black gay men will sometimes laugh at the homophobe's joke if only to share in the identity gained by being the lowest of the low.

At the same time, this part of the tape re-articulates the experiences of silence and anger for black gay men. And those responses and experiences are, emotionally, perhaps their strongest shared experience with black straight men. In other words, if the oppression that all black men face in U.S. culture results in silence and anger, black gay men bear an additional burden, but one which is fundamentally emotionally similar to the experience of black heterosexual males. Hemphill's face,

silent, unchanging, in close up, looks at the camera/audience with the face that white police and other agents of social control would call "sullen," and provides the visual reference for a complex relay of accusations which finally turn back at the viewer. Again and again the tape repeats this device of showing a face, registering it as visual fact, while a voice over either situates it or provides an interior monologue. Riggs' own image appears in a variety of lightings and framing, each change reminding us of a different facet of his narrative. The tension between sound track and visual track produces and reproduces the cultural situation of black gay men: the dominant discourse of white and heterosexual culture tries to place them outside of culture, beyond the pale, to make them invisible and silent. Resistance must begin with speech, with a counter discourse. Movement from interior monologue to public speech, from the space of one's self to public space, is the final momentum of the tape.

Another first person story details internalized oppression. It begins with a story of self-denial, of how, walking in the white gay ghetto, the speaker (Riggs) avoided looking at another black gay man. As they approached each other walking, both averted their gaze. Unable, unwilling to recognize the anger, the pain, the silence, which they shared, both sought avoidance. A chant begins: "Anger unvented... becomes pain unspoken... becomes rage released... becomes violence, cha cha cha."

A new speaker, Steve Langley, arrives to urge you, if you're economically and/or emotionally coming up short, to "snatch what's yours from the universe." From this point on the tape urges positive responses to the situations it has described. Dance, music, and dress are portrayed as expressive arts which help define and further a gender/sexual and racial identity. First, in a section that introduces voguing, we find a group of black gay men sharing dinner conversation in a restaurant (with House music under). The basics of vogue are introduced: that it is a dance form developed by black and Puerto Rican men; that its dancers imitate the styles and gestures and poses of high fashion models, including photo posing and runway display; that people form groups called houses which then show a fashion allegiance to a clothing design company — the house of Chanel, etc. While several performers are shown in their routines, a poem is read to a mother, confessing a son's gay desires and identity.

Vogue appropriates images and style from haute couture for a street based culture of resistance. For the dispossessed to "snatch what's theirs from the universe" is to appropriate from the dominant culture, from the mass culture images of fashion in *Vogue*, and to turn those images to their own use. This essentially postmodern appropriation, a cultural scavenging or thrift shop image recycling, brings together two distinct yet overlapping patterns of cultural resistance. African American culture from slave times on perpetuates itself within certain limits imposed by the oppressor (such as restrictions on specific movements in dancing) and maintains continuity with its African origins. At the same time it freely trades in available cultural processes from the dominant culture, such as European musical instruments.

Gay culture too has often had a stance of reflection/ refraction toward the

dominant culture, taking over selected parts of it in a way that allows a creative distortion (for example, the enthusiasm in part of gay male culture for opera with its emotional exaggeration, or for some the camp appreciation of Mae West or Joan Crawford, or among others the hypermasculinity of motorcycle culture imagery). As subcultures which freely appropriate from the dominant culture, African American and gay male cultures are always borrowing and changing for their own purposes. The complexity of this activity also provides many different entries into the subculture's symbolic communications for both insiders and outsiders. And in turn this allows for the rapid reappropriation of the appropriated, as Madonna's recent video "Vogue," borrows and hyperaestheticizes street voguing images into high production value, high fashion, and commercial het entertainment. What on the street is an ironic appropriation by the dispossessed, carrying a contradictory message of admiration and critique, is emptied of the cutting side of its criticism when vaulted into the mainstream, although it remains somewhat subversive in its new mainstream context.[9]

The theme of men in groups continues with dancers in a park. This imagery is crossed with a passing visual reference to a black boy dancing, imagery from an early silent film. This makes a somewhat enigmatic statement, perhaps signifying the difference between the boy dancing for the amusement of whites and these men in a group moving for their own pleasure and celebration. But there is no need to interpret the imagery. Here and at various other points in the tape, Riggs makes visual and verbal and musical allusions which remain stated but not explained.

A bar appears as another space of male bonding, a place where black gay men can look at others with desire as well as recognition. Using slow motion posterized images, this section reprises "Black is the color..." as instrumental music while another poem is heard. Further group expressions appear with a four-man doo wop group doing a fine song which has a nice irony: "Hey, boy, can you come out tonight?" The invitation to romance and to the open expression of gay identity turns the dominant culture's heterosexual expectations about men singing love songs upside down in a way that is comic and loving at the same time. The editing of both sound and image becomes more complex here. Having followed the piece this far, the audience increasingly finds references to many simultaneous levels of reference and understanding. From the sweet tender love song the soundtrack segues into the chant, "Black, Black, Black, Black! Gay, Gay, Gay, Gay!" and we see the source, black men marching together with banners in a gay pride parade. (Actually the chant is similar in form to the earlier scene snatched from SCHOOL DAZE of the homophobic chant, but here the meaning is totally reversed.)

The mood changes again to poetry which supplies invitations to love making and images of men undressing, caressing, and kissing. But as this set of sensual fantasies proceeds, we are brought up short with a reminder of AIDS: "never think of a fuck." And Hemphill's warning about the danger and fear of physical sex in the present underlines the anxiety ("this nut might kill us") that often forces men to deny their physical desires and emotional needs. As we see a series of obituary photos and headlines of black men, we hear Riggs: "I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood." The last photo is his own image. "I listen for my own quiet

implosion." His image dissolves into others, of heroes such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and finally the sequence comes to a complex montage of Martin Luther King marching in civil rights demonstrations cross cut with the black gay pride marchers, as Riggs' voice explains his own resolve, his own move from silence to speaking. The tape thus ends with a movement into history, a placing of the individual within history. The adolescent boy, silenced when he became the first to take an historic step and integrate a white school in Georgia, has become the man who finds his voice through the community of black gay men and who has the commanding ability to express that in the video we are watching. A call to action sounds: "Black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act."

This last point in the tape has become controversial in its reception. By its placement at the end, appearing in print as intertitles, and then repeated by a chorus of voices, and being phrased in the affirmative/imperative, the tape seems to privilege same race homosexual relations. At least that's how many viewers have taken it, including Cary Alan Johnson in a review in *Gay Community News*, who complained, in an otherwise very positive review, that it was deceptive for Riggs to make this claim, and to imply that he had left behind days of being attracted to white men when he had a white lover in the present.[10] This comment brought a heated retort from Essex Hemphill in a subsequent issue of the newsweekly, with the poet denouncing the reviewer for narrowness,[11] and a more extended discussion of the issues by Riggs in an interview with Phil Harper.[12] Riggs has also addressed the issue in a later interview with Lyle Ashton Harris.[13] While Riggs argues for a broader, desexualized, interpretation of the slogan, the work doesn't force this interpretation, and through narrowing its focus to images of black men with black men in both social and erotic situations in the second half, after Riggs has declared that he finally left the white gay ghetto, it seems to validate racial bonding and erotic attraction at the same time. Also, there is a reprise of the image of Riggs being caressed and kissed by a black man shortly before the slogan is given. Whatever Riggs intended, he chose to leave out information that many find important.

Clearly the issue is complex enough that it demands its own space for discussion (and the Hemphill retort and the subsequent interviews by Riggs are a good starting point for that dialogue). Riggs has elaborated:

"This is what I am addressing at bottom: So many of the reasons that prohibit us from growing, from healing, from being free are that we hate each other and we hate ourselves as black gay men. As black men, period. You see it in the statistics, you see it in the knifings and the shootings, the dropouts and the fathers' abandonments. If you acknowledge your own humanity, your own worth, you acknowledge it in relation to somebody else — we do not live in voids. And so you are forced to realize the human potential in others. ...For me the revolution will occur not when white people are overthrown but rather when we can say to ourselves, 'I love who I am, I love my blackness, my maleness. What I am is whole and beautiful, and really wonderful,' and when we come to terms with each other and say, 'I love you.' ... Until we



heal on a basic level, a cultural psychological, and communal level, we will never achieve freedom; we will always be a sick people. Those are hard words, because they play into what other people consider part of the pathology of the black community. Yet we do need to acknowledge that — for reasons different from those the white conservative ideologues claim — there is sickness in our community and come to terms with it. We have to begin to heal ourselves by going through all the doors that we have locked and tried to forget about — the doors of slavery, the doors of homophobia, of internalized racism, of shame about being black. A lot of that remains hidden and becomes art of the subtext of all our actions toward each other.”[14]

The structure and form of TONGUES UNTIED allows for the introduction of many more issues than does ETHNIC NOTIONS. In comparison TONGUES UNTIED is much denser and richer in its allusions and analysis. At the same time, it must be said that not everyone viewing it will have essentially the same or even a similar experience. Some people just shut down at one point or another. In a classroom screening, one student asked out loud, "Is that a man?" on seeing the transvestite on the street and, shocked that it was, refused to watch the section. This is only a more extreme example of what the tape does continually, which is to provide many subjective "hooks" into the piece that not everyone will pick up on. The tape's density — using rapid changes within specific poems as well as strong contrasts between one passage and another as well as the contrast of image against word or sound — encourages a diversity of response. The audience is invited to do a kind of postmodern sampling of the tape. A second or third viewing brings forward new aspects of the tape's argument, and also makes clearer the relation of Riggs as principal narrator to the diverse voices of different poets who are also represented in the work. Riggs is not trying to make his own condition of testing HIV positive a point on which a major understanding in the tape turns. That he has tested positive is a fact that explains some of the urgency and perhaps some of the direct plain spokenness of the tape. It's as if he were saying that at this point in his life he wants to get certain issues out clearly and unmistakably. Yet he also implicates, with a variety of different "hooks," different viewers on their own terms of experience: as black men, as gays, as people who are facing a possibly terminal condition, as people who have experienced racism, and so forth.

The knowledge needed to understand the entire range of the piece is considerable. The ideal viewer would know the face and reputation of Joseph Beams who was an important writer and editor of the first anthology of black gay male writing, *In the Life*, and source of the "Black men loving black men..." quotation, as well as pick up on a visual reference to Isaac Julien's LOOKING FOR LANGSTON. At other points, such as the comic primer on snap, the tape teaches its audience all it needs to know. Similarly with the poems. Some of the writings speak directly of, from, and to black gay experience, leaving outsiders simply to register what's said, while others such as Essex Hemphill's invitation to love, "Black Beans," are lyrics open to anyone's understanding and appreciation. The poetry which motivated Riggs to begin the project, an outpouring of new wirings by black gay men forming a cultural identity in the 80s, provides the most efficient "hook" for all viewers of the

tape. It is unmistakably framed within black cultural expression — in themes, vocabulary, syntax, rhythm and cadence. Yet it is also very easy to access for people outside that culture, principally because the first person address of much of it speaks directly to the audience.

TONGUES UNTIED does not cover all the issues of black gay men, nor is it able to explain all the details of what it does address. It seems strongly marked by men speaking from relatively stable urban experience. There's no speaking from the position of men in rural and small town situations, in the armed forces, in prison or on parole, or bound in the distress of alcoholism, drug addiction/recovery, or mental illness. It makes only the most passing allusions to the situations of gay men who are fathers and husbands. Stories of coming out, especially within one's family, are conspicuously absent.[15] It doesn't address the color line and class distinctions within the black gay community. And it doesn't offer a substantial critique of masculinity as found in both gay and straight forms, although such a critique is one of the major concerns of black women intellectuals over the past few decades.

But no work of 55 minutes length could adequately address all those issues, although subsequently, in various interviews Riggs has shown his acute sensitivity to other issues. For example, in the *Afterimage* interview with Harris he articulately argues for the importance of a variety of black women writers in developing an analysis of African American culture and politics. Making TONGUES UNTIED and participating in its subsequent reception has put Riggs in a distinct position of intellectual and political leadership. He was a major speaker at the annual Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Academic Conference held at his alma mater, Harvard, in fall 1990, and his address subsequently appeared *Outlook*. [16] His essay on Black Macho media was originally given at the Whitney Museum Conference, "African-American Film and Media Culture: A Re-examination." And within a few months of TONGUES UNTIED's release, he became a celebrity in black gay culture, appearing in the celebrity columns of *BLX* and *Thing*. [17]

TONGUES UNTIED is one of the most sophisticated philosophical and political analyses of race, gender, and sexuality ever put on tape. Analytic and passionate, it marks the point from which further questions, further explorations, must be undertaken.

## NOTES

1. Most of the kitsch was collected by Jan Faulkner, one of the two non-academic talking heads, and the end credits indicate that the collection was a starting point for the tape. Why this black woman collects these items is not addressed.
2. This is tricky ground, however. Star image can differ significantly from any one particular role, and an actor's career over time must be taken into account with a figure like Foxx, who spent most of his career in black venues and doing blue material and late in life finally became a cross-over figure with the SANFORD AND SON show. (And is the *Cosby* show really any different except in class position of the sitcom dads?). One can easily make the case that Day (best remembered for his

appearance in PURPLE RAIN and his music videos with his group The Time) is a self-ironic or postmodern buffoon. Mr. T's star image goes beyond just being the violent sidekick because he is also famous for celebrity public appearances encouraging kids to stay in school.

3. In U.S. culture, Jewish comedians provide an interesting reference point for such an investigation, and Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* contains copious examples in its discussion of self-protective humor.

4. "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," *The Independent: Film and Video Monthly*, 14:3 (April 1991), 32-34.

5. Audience reception analysis in general is now an area of considerable controversy with an older model of mass media as indoctrination being challenged by a relativist model which assumes people can and do read mass culture many different ways. The former position tends to be supported by print culture intellectuals, the latter by media culture intellectuals. For an interesting contrast consider James Baldwin's testimony of his childhood movie going experiences in *The Devil Finds Work* (NY: Dial. 1976), e.g.: "The only actor of the era with whom I identified was Henry Fonda, I was not alone. A black friend of mine, after seeing Henry Fonda in THE GRAPES OF WRATH, swore that Fonda had colored blood. You could tell, he said, by the way Fonda walked down the road at the end of the film: *white men don't walk like that!* and he imitated Fonda's stubborn, patient, wide-legged hike away from the camera." (p. 21).

6. It would be missing the point to fault the tape for not being uniform or theoretically consistent about this idea, which most critical cultural analysis today would discuss under the term "ideology." As a message for a general audience the tape works very well by stating this general concept several times in different ways using different terminology.

7. This folkloric gesture is not explained in other terms, but one black student told me that many African American mothers get their children's attention and scold them by extending an arm and snapping their fingers. The gestural language could be seen as the adaptation of a female gesture to a gay male subcultural expression, a transformation found in other aspects of gay male culture.

8. That the location is Washington is my deduction, but the story gains more resonance since mostly working class and lower middle class Black people ride the bus in that mostly black city. Thus the performance is one which is open to and for the black community. And it's also one that gives lie to the later articulated notion that somehow black gay men don't "belong" to the black community. The political point is important and worth elaborating. While a certain part of the white gay male community can and does choose to live in yuppie dominated gay ghettos, and while men of color can and do visit such places, by and large they don't live there. For one thing, because of the pervasive economic discrimination against blacks, most don't have as much money, and also they often have specific ties of job, family, friendship, and community involvement in the African American community. For another thing, there's racism in the gay ghetto, just as in the

society at large. In a way this produces different patterns of homophobia and discrimination in different communities. Middle class urban/ suburban straight whites can often see out of the closet white gay men as distinctly separate because spatially they live and recreate "elsewhere." In an urban environment where the different communities do abut or overlap, straights may well be not antagonistic when essentially sharing many of the same middle class white urban concerns about having a nice, clean, safe neighborhood. Homophobia in the white working class or the black community is often more clearly focused on specific individuals who are out in the community and openly articulated in name-calling and derogatory speech. The point being, that if there sometimes seems to be more open and overt homophobia in such communities, it is also the case that there may in fact be more overt interaction with and direct awareness of the "Other."

9. For an analysis of the complex contradictions in Madonna's star image, performance and videos: Ramona Curry, "Madonna — Pastiche or Parody?" *Journal of Film and Video*, 42:2 (Summer 90), pp. 15-30.

10. Johnson, "Not in Knots: TONGUES UNTIED is the Black Gay Official Story," *GCN*, Feb 25-Mar 3, 1990, p. 11.

11. Hemphill, "Choice," *GCN*, May 6-12, 1990, pp. 11, 13.

12. Harper. "Speaking Out about TONGUES UNTIED": An Interview with Videomaker Marlon Riggs," *GCN*, May 6-12, 1990, pp. 10-11.13.

13. Harris, "Cultural Healing: An Interview with Marion Riggs," *Afterimage*, Mar 1991, pp. 8-11.

14. Hint, *Afterimage*, p. 11.

15. The importance of coming out stories in the creation of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian culture in North America is well-known. That this very importance might mark class and race privilege is a more recent insight.

16. Riggs. "Ruminations of a Snap Queen: What Time Is It?!" *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, no. 12 (Spring 91), 12-19.

17. Preston G. Guider, "Read My Lips." *BLK: The National Black Lesbian and Gay Newsmagazine*, 2:12 (Dec. 90), 27; "Thing Lists," *Thing* no. 4 (Spring 91), 14.

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